

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001614

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SUBJECT: MORE ETHNIC CLASHES IN NIGERIAN MIDDLE-BELT

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter, reason 1.5 (B/D)

¶11. (U) Summary. Inter-ethnic clashes have occurred in the Middle-Belt States of Bauchi and Taraba, in incidents not apparently connected to the several weeks-long turmoil in neighboring Nasarawa State. In Bauchi, in a predominately Christian area, the majority Siyawa people have fought Hausa-Fulani in a reprise of disputes stretching back to early 1990s. According to the International Red Cross, perhaps as many as 20,000 persons have fled their homes, and several dozen people may have lost their lives. In Taraba, a dispute between Fulani herders and Tiv farmers resulted in eight deaths, according to the National Police. Residents are also fleeing the area, but the numbers are unknown. A fragile peace appears to be holding in Nasarawa, while the Governors of Benue and Nasarawa jointly work toward reconciliation. End summary.

¶12. (C) Scattered press reports surfaced this week of ethnic conflict in Bauchi and Taraba State, two Middle-Belt neighbors of Nasarawa State, scene of ethnic turmoil for the past several weeks. The Governor of Bauchi State, Adamu Mu'azu, confirmed to Poloff July 4 violent conflict in the southern section of his state, in an area predominately inhabited by the Christian Siyawa group. Explaining that long-standing feuds over access to land and to local government resources had fueled the conflict, the Governor claimed that the conflict had no real religious dimension to it, and was purely a local dispute between groups long hostile to each other. The Governor said he had spent two nights sleeping at the Local Government headquarters at Tafewa Balewa, circulating in the area during the day and urging peace.

¶13. (C) Head of the International Red Cross (IRC) effort in Nigeria, Jean-Jacques Gacond, told poloff July 6 that, according to estimates collected from traditional leaders by his office, as many as 20,000 people had fled their homes, and several dozen deaths had occurred. Gacond cautioned that these estimates were "soft," as only second hand, and perhaps unreliable. Gacond said that, in his opinion, the state government authorities were masking to some extent the religious nature of the conflict to prevent any spill-over effect in areas where Muslims and Christians were intermixed (a phenomenon prevalent throughout the Middle-Belt). However, he also thought that the violence had largely been contained and people were beginning to go back to their homes. He had a team on the scene, and would hear more precise details in the next several days, he said.

¶14. (C) In Taraba State to the southeast of Bauchi, and directly east of Nasarawa, fighting has occurred between Tiv farmers and Fulani herdsmen. At this time of year, with the rainy season well underway, Fulani herders across the Middle-Belt are on their way back North with their cattle and sheep, and conflict often results with local farmers when herds trample crops. National Police sources in Abuja told us that eight deaths had occurred. Other sources in Taraba say that the death toll is "at least" eighteen. While some press reports have linked these clashes in Taraba with the earlier clashes between Tivs, Jukuns, Hausa-speakers and other minority ethnic groups in southeastern Nasarawa State (which borders on Taraba), this appears to be an isolated incident. Police in Abuja report that people have fled their homes to avoid the fighting, but had no estimates. Some media reports recorded 25,000 people fleeing the conflict, which appears to be centered near the predominately Jukun town of Wukari. According to Embassy sources, state police commissioners in Makurdi, capital of Benue, and Yola, capital of Adamawa, have each dispatched additional security personnel to Taraba to aid in damping down the conflict. While some Jukuns, traditional rivals to the Tivs, seem to be involved as well in the conflict between herders and farmers, they appear to play a subsidiary role so far.

¶15. (C) In nearby Nasarawa State, a fragile peace appears to be holding. IRC head Gacond said that the numbers of people at the displaced persons camps in Benue had basically stabilized at about 8,000, with some movement back and forth

between those staying with friends and family in the area (about 40,000) and those accommodated in the two camps located north of Makurdi at Dauda and Uikom. Gacond said that in Lafia, capital of Nasarawa, the numbers had declined to about 2,000, and people did appear to be returning to their homes. At the Embassy July 4th reception, Governor Adamu of Nasarawa and Governor Akume of Benue (who arrived together) appeared optimistic that the worst of the conflict was over, and that displaced people in Benue would also begin to return to their homes in the near future. While they confirmed that additional clashes had occurred over the week-end of June 30-July 1, with some loss of life, they said that their joint efforts at peace-keeping had reduced tension in many areas.

16. (C) Comment. Ethnic conflict in the Middle-Belt, based on long-standing disputes over land, access to government resources, and community status, often play out in relative obscurity, and can continue for months without much notice from the national media (and sometimes with the connivance of government authorities anxious to downplay the tensions and prevent spreading turmoil). The latest conflicts in Bauchi and Taraba do not appear to have any connection to Nasarawa State's own ethnic clashes. While there may be some religious component to the Bauchi fighting, this so far seems to be a localized dispute with no great potential to spill over into other areas. The conflict between Tivs and Jukuns, bitter rivals in many communities in several states in the eastern Middle-Belt, also does not at present appear to be spreading beyond Nasarawa. End comment.

Jeter